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## Split-state will protect cattle

By STEVE KELLY

Cattle is big industry in Montana. There are approximately 2.6 million cows in Montana.

So, when something comes along to threaten this valuable industry, we need to quickly and effectively find a practical solution to deal with it. Such is the case with brucellosis and the recent loss of Montana's brucellosis-free status. The potential damage to producers and the economy are significant. We need to address the problem quickly and with a practical solution.

The problem appears to be the intermingling of cattle, bison and elk along the edge of Yellowstone Park leading to the infection of one herd of cows. What to do about it?

Up until the present there have been many proposals to force the federal government to contain their bison herd in the park. These actions have been met with resistance and yielded little in the way of results. This situation is a federal matter and should probably be dealt with by our congressmen. Once the problem enters Montana then it is our problem and the solutions are up to us.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer's proposal was to deal with the matter in a timely fashion. This meant we needed to contain the threat and continue to work on the up hill battle with the federal government and park bison. The governor's solution was to isolate the problem in a narrow corridor around the park, and hopefully contain it in a manageable area.

If another case of brucellosis was found in the hot zone, then only that small portion of the state would lose its brucellosis-free status, and the rest of the state would not be impacted. Given that less than 5 percent of the state's cattle are in the area near the park, this so-called split-state solution would prevent this onerous status from affecting 2.5 million of the state's 2.6 million cows. With this near-term solution, producers would then be free to focus its efforts on longer-term solutions like the eradication of the disease in the Yellowstone herds.

Well, another cow in a herd near Pray was recently found to be infected. This means an economic hit of more than \$6 million in hard cost but even more severe are the soft costs to the states seed stock producers.

We need to find a practical solution to this problem. When Gov. Schweitzer proposed his split-state solution a year ago, the Montana Stockgrowers Association did a good job of getting their point across at a Board of Livestock meeting. They did so in a fairly boisterous manner which slammed the door on the governor's proposal.

I accept my share of the blame for not being there to support the governor's common-sense approach that looked after the great majority of his constituents who are involved in the cattle business. That is all that I can ask of one of my elected officials. I applaud him for that.

I realize that groups like the Montana Stockgrowers have more on the agenda than this single issue, but if we are going to effectively tackle this problem, we are going to have to make it a stand alone issue, put the politics and the egos aside and do what is best for 95 percent of the producers in this state. It is time for cattle producers from all four corners of the state, most of whom will never be impacted by brucellosis, to show their support and resolve this issue and then get after the job of supporting and solving the problem in the second state around the park.

We need to support Gov. Schweitzer's split-state proposal and get the clock ticking to the time when we can be brucellosis-free once again. Without split state we may fall into an endless spiral where new cases pop up every few months in the hot zone and we never get out of this mess.

Anybody who believes that political rhetoric and vocal posturing can solve the problem has unfortunately already been proven wrong. These "solutions" only serve to line the pockets of lobbyists and lawyers while the states largest industry suffers. We can change, and we can adapt, and we can work together to solve this problem.

Steve Kelly is a rancher from Fort Benton.